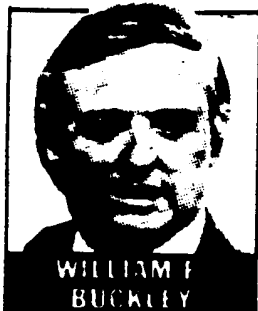


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# Thou shalt not covert thy mission



HERE IS the crystallizing consensus on the Iranian matter:

● There is a question as to the legality of the enterprise. The relevant laws (the Arms Export Control Act, the Export Administration Act, the Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Anti-Terrorism Act) are subject to ambiguous reading, but Operation Iran greatly strains the clear intent of Congress.

● The overriding purpose was to encourage the "moderates" in Iran. Hashemi Rafsanjani, the point man in the secret dealings with Robert McFarlane, has denounced the U.S., having before that leaked the entire affair. And McFarlane says everyone he had talked

to in Tehran was now in danger of hanging. Perhaps Rafsanjani's denunciations are to distract the hangman. Either way, we certainly have not encouraged the moderates.

● Nor, if Secretary of State Shultz is to be believed, have we discouraged Iran from terrorist activity.

● We did get back three hostages. But then if Iran wants to bank up on its hostage supply, all it has to do is to get one of its gangs in Lebanon to whisk away three more. We could retaliate with an air strike against Iran, but we'd have to dodge anti-aircraft missiles we delivered to Iran a few months ago.

● Our allies are spitting mad. A part of this is hypocrisy, because with the exception of Britain, they have not behaved endearingly in the war against terrorism. But there is no question the anti-terrorist crusade insofar as Europe is concerned is now in shambles.

● The moderate Arab states are

dumbfounded by what we did. A victory by Iran over Iraq could mean aggression against them.

● McFarlane, Shultz, Donald Regan and CIA Director William Casey have all said things, or not said things, the effect of which is to convey a sense of anarchy in the West Wing that severely undermines the President's prestige.

● Operation Iran was unsuccessful.

Having reached these conclusions, we can ask: Is there a role for covert operations? A few years ago, George Kennan said: If a covert operation stands any chance of being blown, then it should not be undertaken, and all covert operations nowadays run that risk. If that rule is to be observed, we should put an end to all covert operations. But this is the counsel of despair. We live in a world in which secrecy is essential to the execution of important missions. Moreover, it is not impossible. Henry Kissinger managed about 20 secret

meetings in Paris with the North Vietnamese negotiator. Not one of these meetings, though the logistics were infinitely complicated, was penetrated.

But that kind of polish presupposes congressional cooperation. The various war powers acts, together with the intensive congressional supervision of the CIA, have subverted the capacity of the President to bring off covert operations. Granted that the idea behind Operation Iran was underbaked, there would not have been much harm done if no one knew about it. Whether this could have been possible given the need for Iranian cooperation, one can't tell.

**B**UT WE HAVE an object lesson here that ought to extend beyond merely the criticism of the apparatus in the White House. It is this: You cannot hope to conduct an extensive covert operation without relying on senior skills, and under the law this is increasingly difficult.